Grand masters

On the giant oak table in the deserted kitchen is a huge white pot of white lilies, a basket of marrows, an open book called Shrub Roses of Today, a red velvet workbox, a bit of plastic piping, three empty tins of diet Coke, three pairs of spectacles, a lovely pattern of beech nuts arranged with care and a single large black suede shoe. The kitchen is the biggest room in a big house belonging to Julian and Isabel Bannerman, and their three young sons, Ismay, Rex and Bertie. There is a dog called Ivy and a 6ft-tall New Zealand nanny called Nick.

The house is Grade II listed. Norman in foundation, with Early English, Tudor, and 18th- and 19th-century embellishments, it has arresting features rare in the average family home, such as a 13th-century church attached, two Norman tithe barns, a Norman cellarium, a medieval laveratory, a (Grade I), a Roman well and a Victorian cressit – as well as handsome views on all sides.

'It was like a miniature Knole 20 minutes from the centre of Bath,' said Julian. 'and seven years ago it
seemed a lot of house for the money. The only problem was that he didn’t have a lot of money.

At the time their friends implored them to reconsider: it was so overgrown with Leylandii you could see neither out nor in; it was all plate-glass windows and plasterboard partitions and banqueting and fluffy carpets: it was creepy and gloomy; the roof was bad, the chimneys falling down, and Isabel was pregnant.

These well-wishful friends could remember the restoration horrors of their last house, the Ivy, a baroque ruin in Chippenham with neither water nor electricity, and a housing estate in the garden. The Bannermans don’t do things in the same order as other people, and the friends remembered them moving a small mountain to hide the estate while continuing to wash up in a red plastic bucket set in the frame of an old Singer pedal sewing-machine – an arrangement that lasted for three years. However the Ivy was a triumphant success. Architectural journalists came to write about the house and gardening writers came to write about the garden, and the Bannermans were in business.

They are an exciting pair, quixotic, gifted, daring. Their job is designing gardens, walled gardens, groves, follies, hermitages, temples, and they have ideas so grand as to make one gasp. For Sir John Paul Getty at Wormley, they constructed a vaulted tunnel between two chalk cliffs – with a garden on top – that is a marvel of engineering beauty and looks like a Piranesi. Prince Charles – Prince of Wales – has a 17th-century pyramid at Highgrove; Lord Cholmondeley has a 17th-century green man with a fountain spouting out of his mouth at Houghton; and Andrew Lloyd Webber has a four-are lilac maze. They have just been to Windsor Castle to collect a Europa Nostra award for restoring the dairy and the Pulham water garden at Waddesdon for Jacob Rothschild.

Julian is 49. He wore a purple Boden shirt, perhaps he always wears them because I saw several more on the washing-line. He’s a charming, comfortable-looking figure but beady underneath, a mass of knowledge. He gives an impression of size but this has perhaps to do with the scale of his ideas; there are three oak tables in the kitchen, each 12ft long, and a clock with a face almost as big as Big Ben’s. He’s the son of a Scottish doctor and would have been an architect if only he’d had the maths (eight attempts at O-level).

He met Isabel in Edinburgh, where she was at the university and he owned Bannerman’s Bar, a trendy bohemian haunt. Because they do everything together, it’s hard to tell where one Bannerman leaves off and the other takes up. Is Julian the temperamental visionary, and Isabel the practical one? It is Isabel who knows about plants, sews pelmets for the four-posters, writes the letters. Julian can re-lead a roof and build a wall. They do much of the physical work themselves; they had both plastered and lime-washed the room I slept in. It’s always work in progress. What seems to matter most is that the sheets are linen, the food delicious and the overall effect wondrous.

Isabel is 10 years younger than Julian.
and a beauty. She is the great-granddaughter of Hilaire Belloc and great-great-great-granddaughter of the 18th-century chemist Joseph Priestley, who discovered oxygen (and invented soda water). Her mother, Barbara Eustace, had an antiques shop in the New King’s Road. ‘She had fantastic style and a great eye and she spent all the housekeeping on things and starved us.’

‘A lot of people don’t like things,’ Julian said. ‘They like space – the art-galler look. Of course they still smoke and drink and have dirty socks lying about, but everything’s tidied up for the photographs.’

They tend to be clutter people themselves. When it came to their own house, they wanted to unpack everything. ‘People buy a house for a reason, and quite often, by the time the builder’s been in and out, they’ve destroyed the reason they bought it,’ said Julian. ‘The magic has gone. It’s like a garden: what you do has to be right for what you’re given. Each house has to go through lots of generations and each has its own solution.’

The children have the best bedrooms. Rex’s has a four-poster with a helmet from the old Pump House in Bath. Bertie has a Gothic cupboard.

Islay’s has five huge sash windows. He seems to have his own dressing-room but I could be wrong. They also do well with bathrooms. The house has five: one for parents, one for guests, and one each for Islay, Rex and Bertie who are 11, nine and six.

‘We spend most of our waking lives in kitchens and bathrooms,’ said Isabel, ‘and 1996 was the best year for plumbing. Iron radiators fit so much better; to heat a house this size you would need masses of those hideous panel things.’ In their bathroom is a canopy bath with water shooting out
from the sides. It has a linoleum floor. They like linoleum—the real stuff made with linseed, not plastic.

We were now in the library, sitting on sofas covered in creamy French linen (old sheets), me next to Rex’s cricket bat. The room is Strawberry Hill Gothic. The idea for it began with a fancy Nash kitchen cupboard from Ireland of which they made three copies. Now the four cupboards are filled with books and noble heads gaze down on us from a lofty height. Books, Isabel said, furnish a room.

The chimney piece comes from an old church organ, intended to look like William Beckford’s gate at Fonthill. There’s seagrass on the floor and a Ziegler rug, and the walls are painted in what the Bannermans call Cindy doll raspberry pink. ‘We agonised over the colour and Julian put this on late one night in the dark,’ said Isabel, ‘but we’re thrilled with it.’ This is where they draw and work in the mornings, so there’s a computer. ‘I don’t see any point in covering these things up,’ Julian said, ‘like driving a car and pretending it’s a horse and cart.’ He added that the moonlight looked wonderful through the glazed windows.

The rest of the house is like a three-dimensional history lesson: the fire on which they cooked 700 years ago, the meat room, the ice-cold dairy with its thick slate shelves, the wine cellar covered in white fungus thick as snow, an 18th-century cheese-making vat not conforming to EU regulations. It was indeed an awful lot of house for the money.

I peered through one of the glazed windows and, to my alarm, saw two undertakers outside and, moving

at a stately pace through the arch, a Rolls-Royce hearse. A film company had borrowed the house to make a gangster film.

The excitement was all in the cellars; in the billiard room (once the servants’ hall) the film crew had installed a red Formica bar, a television set the size of a sofa and a defibrillation unit. There were a few people hanging round in blood-stained shirts, the gruesome effect rather spoilt by the homely sight of Rex’s hamster scuttling across

the billiard table. Bertie was in a pair of headphones, his hands glued together with Blacktie given to him by the assistant director.

Julian went off to see what was happening in his bedroom—was it sex or murder? Rex took me and a few actors up the tower, a hefty climb for which you need the rope attached to the newel post supporting the winding stair made of great lumps of oak. From the top you could see Keyneston, the Tudor kennels. Isabel’s vegetable garden, an ancient stone wall (completed two months ago) concealing the new swimming-pool, and you could marvel at what had been accomplished.

All was not to rights in the panelled hall on our descent. Barely had one time to take in the stone dado that separated the nobs from the jocks at medieval banquets; the fireplace 8ft across, the framed robes (found in an Edinburgh skip) worn by two of Mahdi’s followers while besieging Gordon at Khartoum; and certainly not the 17th-century oak table because this was covered, literally covered, in wreaths of fresh flowers—about 30 of them—with affecting messages such as ‘Dearest Eddie, Always Remembered by the Good Times’, ‘Eddie Sadly Missed’.

It was too much for Julian. ‘Come back next year,’ he said, ‘and you will find all this knack-knackery and tomfockery painted white, the plants exiled from the garden which will be all green—and me in a black Nehru jacket.’